PREFACE

From his first declarations of heavenly visitations and gold plates, Joseph Smith became a symbol of American exceptionalism. The global religious movement he birthed is grounded in an account of Jesus Christ visiting and healing and teaching ancient inhabitants of the Americas shortly after his resurrection, and because the record of this extrabiblical gospel was engraved on gold plates buried near Joseph's boyhood home in Palmyra, New York, his recovery, translation, and publication of the record provided a divine origin story for the United States and a prophetic vision of the nation's future. Further, Joseph framed his own prophetic calling in the context of a heaven-ordained national commitment to pluralism and religious freedom. North America, he taught, would be a gathering place for the elect of all the earth; it housed sacred sites, including the location of Adam and Eve's biblical paradise and the place where his followers would build the New Jerusalem. As a result, the story of Joseph Smith and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is ineluctably bound to providential narratives of American history.

Even those who reject his theological claims have come to regard Joseph Smith as a representative American, the self-made man whose life epitomizes a national lore of original thinking and inspired action. Reflecting on Smith's legacy, the literary and cultural critic Harold Bloom wrote that

> what matters most about Joseph Smith is how American both the man and his religion have proved to be. So self-created was he that he transcends [Ralph Waldo] Emerson and [Walt] Whitman in my imaginative response, and takes his place with the great figures of our fiction, since at moments he appears far larger than life, in the mode of a Shakespearean character. So rich and varied a personality, so vital a spark of divinity, is

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> almost beyond the limits of the human, as normally we construe those limits. To one who does not believe in him, but who has studied him intensely, Smith becomes almost a mythology in himself.[1]

Even those who reject Joseph Smith's foundational claims, that he saw and conversed with God the Father and with Jesus Christ and with angels, cannot help but regard his story as a compelling case study in the American imaginary—a reminder that colonists and early citizens of the United States regarded the North American continent as a place of unparalleled opportunity, where the impossible was made manifest.

Some treatments of the prophet's life have, accordingly, leaned into the fantastical. Orson Scott Card's six-novel *Tales of Alvin Maker* sequence attempts to deal with the supernatural elements of Joseph Smith's life story by setting it in an alternate world, where magic is commonplace. Card recasts Joseph as Alvin Miller, the seventh son of a seventh son, whose magical abilities allow him to reshape the natural world. Like Joseph, Card's protagonist confronts skeptical religious leaders, including the Jonathan Edwards–inspired Reverend Philadelphia Thrower, and receives a midnight visit, in his bed, from a Shining Man who commissions him to restore all things. Card's novels are entertaining and address important moral problems, but displacing Joseph's story into a world of fantasy effectively dodges the most pressing questions raised by his account of heavenly messengers: What does it mean for angels and devils to be active participants in our own, material world? What is God's role in the affairs of nations? If God appeared to Joseph, how can we explain his apparent absence or inaction, in the face of others' suffering and supplication? Why might an impoverished and relatively ignorant adolescent like Joseph Smith be chosen as God's mouthpiece? Joseph's story is saturated with supernatural elements, but his claims must be situated in the known world, or the most challenging questions implicit in his narratives of heavenly visitation are stripped of their potency and relegated to the realm of fantasy.

Most accounts of Joseph's life adopt the opposite approach, hewing so closely to demonstrable facts and historical sources that they, also, eschew the essential questions of visions and angels and miracles. Richard Bushman's *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling,* published in 2005, is still the biographical benchmark, and he treats the prophet's life with meticulous care, grounding every claim in the voluminous primary source material documenting Joseph's life. But such sources are, necessarily, finite; not every event or exchange can be memorialized, so confining our consideration of a subject to the documentary record necessarily relegates important private matters to the dustbin of history. For example, historical sources cannot address questions about miraculous means and divine

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silence or recreate the intimate, undocumented moments shared between Joseph and Emma during their courtship and marriage. Such scenes and questions can only be considered through an imaginative approach that supplements the extant record with inference and analogy and conjecture to reclaim the joy, whimsy, despair, and uncertainty of Joseph's surreal life. The goal of such an approach to Joseph Smith's story is not a more minutely accurate account of his actions but a greater appreciation for the pathos of his experience and the implications of his claims. Ironically, a life substantiating the maxim that truth is stranger than fiction might only be fully appreciated by turning to a fictionalized narrative as the means of reclaiming its full wonder and strangeness.

Only the epic is capacious enough, as a genre, to capture both the historical and the supernatural sweep of Joseph's cosmological story, which situates the prophet *in medias res*, caught up in a conflict between God and Satan predating the world's creation and hastening, through Joseph's prophetic labors, to its conclusion. A genre equally committed to theomachy and national history, the epic poem presupposes the intervention of divine beings in human affairs and frames politics as an outgrowth of providence. In other words, an epic renders human experience in the same terms in which it was understood by Joseph Smith and his followers, who thought of their conversion to the restored gospel of Jesus Christ as a form of participation in the eschatological vision of Revelation: their distinctively American piety pitted against the forces of Satan in a spiritual battle preparing the way for Jesus Christ's Second Coming. To rewrite the story of Joseph Smith as an epic poem, therefore, is to restore the prophet's own imaginary, considering the implications of a literal conflict between hostile, invisible, infernal powers and the benevolent, visible, heavenly beings who taught a New York farm boy to think of himself in heroic terms.

Of course, the heroes of epic poetry—Achilles, Odysseus, Aeneas, Dante, Satan, Adam, and Clarel, among many others—are deeply flawed individuals whose fame is as much a function of their foibles as their exploits. So, too, was Joseph Smith, who willingly dictated a series of revelations documenting his own failings and has been the target of vitriol since his youth. Accordingly, this poem begins and lingers in the interrogative mood, asking whether Joseph is worthy of either the praise or the censure he has attracted over the past two centuries; neither hit-piece nor hagiography, it takes the prophet and his narrative seriously without neglecting elements of his story that might be discomfiting to those who revere him as a paragon of virtue and speaker of heavenly truths. The Joseph readers first meet here, in iambic pentameter, is an embodied teenager who spits and farts and sweats; whether those bodily functions, or sinful

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but altogether human inclinations to sloth and greed and lust and wrath, are compatible with the character of a prophet is a core question of the poem. That question is also representative of the larger dilemma posed by attempts to treat Joseph Smith's narrative of religious experience as history or fantasy. History can account for the healing of Joseph's leg, which was almost amputated because of a typhus infection, but it cannot corroborate Joseph's claim that Jesus Christ, in his role as the Great Physician, healed him of sin's wounds and declared him forgiven. Fantasy might paint a picture of the supernatural vistas opened to Joseph's eyes, when God the Father and Jesus Christ descended from heaven into a grove of trees, but it also forsakes any pretense to the representation of reality. The epic is, from our modern perspective, a hybrid form conjoining the visible and invisible worlds, and the epic hero is a similarly syncretic blend of otherworldly strengths and unmistakably mortal failings.

Although the epic has often been given up for dead, this poetic account of his life is a wager that what modern readers sometimes find off-putting in epic poems like *The Divine Comedy* or *The Canterbury Tales* is not their form or their content but antiquated allusions and language. Modern readers forget that when these and other epics were first declaimed orally or committed to paper, they were voiced in a vernacular accessible to all audiences and spoke to contemporary controversies as well as more timeless topics. The epic harbors encyclopedic aspirations and addresses eternal conflicts, but it is also the outgrowth of a specific historical context. Over the twenty years I have been at work on this poem, I have also been immersed in national conversations on the ethics of torture, the definition of marriage, and the future of democracy. Just as John Milton's first readers saw the English Civil War of their own, recent past as an essential subtext for his presentation of a premortal war in heaven, those who read *Joseph* will naturally recognize their own experience of American politics in the war of words and tumult of opinions Joseph Smith confronted during his adolescence. In other words, the prophet's story is presented here in the form of an epic poem because that is still the best genre for performing the dual task of situating him within the broader historic and literary tradition appropriate to his stature as the founder of a major world religion while also considering the continuing relevance of his story to our own conception and experience of divinity and national identity.

Both Joseph's contemporaries and those who have contemplated him from the distance of decades considered the epic form indispensable to a proper chronicle of his life. Bayard Taylor, whose rise to fame roughly coincided with the death of Joseph Smith in 1844, thought the martyr's story a fit subject for his *magnum opus* and published *The Prophet: A*

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Tragedy, in 1874. Thirty years later Orson F. Whitney, an apostle of the Church, composed an epic that ranges from a premortal council in heaven to Joseph Smith's vision of a future day when Church members preserve the United States from downfall: "Ephraim saves / Columbia's soul from chaos."[2] Two of the more notable twentieth-century Latter-day Saint epics are R. Paul Cracroft's *A Certain Testimony* (Deseret Press, 1979) and *The Nephiad* of Michael R. Collings (The Borgo Press, 1996), both of which devote more time to the retelling of biblical and Book of Mormon accounts than to Joseph's nineteenth-century life. In short, Joseph Smith and the Church and the scriptural records surviving him have attracted epicists aplenty over the years, but these literary accounts of the prophet's life and legacy have largely been ignored by readers.

This neglect might be attributed to the decline of poetry, as a vehicle for both leisure and edification, over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. But the perpetual interest of readers in new editions of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* suggest that form is not an impediment if the subject is of sufficient interest, and Joseph Smith is a figure whose importance to the American mythos only seems to grow over the course of centuries; as debates over Christian nationalism and religious freedom grow more strident, his relevance to contemporary political and religious questions becomes more and more apparent. Like many of these new translations of Homer, this narrative of Joseph's life reads like prose, forsaking the archaic language and syntax that readers of Geoffrey Chaucer or Edmund Spenser might associate with English epics. Anyone who appreciates a good novel will be able to understand and enjoy the story unfolding in these pages, yet those with an ear for meter or an eye for the poetic line will appreciate that the narrative's form provides a metacommentary on the prophet's life above and beyond the explicit message of its language.

Joseph is divided into two volumes, each of which can be read independently—potentially in a single sitting. Samuel Johnson complained of *Paradise Lost*, "None ever wished it longer," and that accusation applies equally to many other epics, which prolong their narratives with asides on a wide variety of subjects.[3] However, readers should, by design, finish each of these volumes with an unsettling sense that more must be said. In his thirty-ninth year Joseph's life was cut short by an assassin's bullet, and many who study his career have expressed curiosity about what he might have accomplished if afforded additional decades. His death was a disquieting event that troubled his followers, many of whom believed that his story would end in triumph, at the Second Coming of Jesus Christ. Readers might find these volumes similarly disquieting, as the arc of his life is unexpectedly cut short in each. The first volume, *Awakenings*, ends

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in despair, but an informed reader will know that remarkable spiritual experiences and accomplishments are around the corner for Joseph. The second volume, *New Covenants*, ends in contentment, but again, an informed reader will know that serious controversy and adversity would arrive to afflict the prophet and his followers shortly after its concluding scene. The aim of these foreshortened narratives is to provide new vantage points from which to survey the life and legacy of Joseph Smith, seeing him not as the static martyr of 1844, robbed of possibility, but as a figure whose future is still indeterminate, unsettled. The confused and troubled boy whose anguished cry concludes volume one is a very different figure from the confident and contented father appearing at the end of volume two. Each volume tells a different story, featuring a different cast of characters; the prophet's parents, who feature prominently in the first volume, are succeeded by Emma Hale Smith and Oliver Cowdery in the second, and Joseph is himself transformed in the intervening white space.

And yet, both volumes are part of a larger whole whose structure draws attention to the multiplicity of history. Each is composed of 2,500 lines, and careful readers will recognize similarities in the language, ideas, and events presented in parallel passages. For example, in the early lines of *Awakenings*, Joseph listens to a preacher declare the necessity of entering into a baptismal covenant:

> "But
> admission to perfection's pastures can't
> be gained by sinners half so vile as you—"
>
> (Now Joseph saw that bony finger wagged
> his way, now felt himself condemned by God)
>
> "—unless you first incline your head, accept
> his yoke, and join the fold by baptism."

In the equivalent section of *New Covenants*, Joseph asks Emma, whom he is courting, to accompany him on an errand to retrieve the golden plates from the angel Moroni, and she responds with a condition:

> "Just promise that, when God
> asks you to form a new society,
> you will remember us—the ladies—too."
>
> He bowed his head and promised her, "Yes."
>
> "Thank
> you," Emma answered. "That will do for now,
> until Moroni comes to give the book
> into your custody."

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The repetition of a single word (*head*) in line 166 of each passage creates a linguistic tie between *Awakenings* and *New Covenants*, and the broader parallels in plot raise questions about ecclesiastical authority, gender, and the nature of covenants or promises. Either passage could stand on its own, but reading vertically, across volumes, renders the poem a commentary on itself, introducing new perspectives on language and events a reader might have considered closed—in the past.

Some two hundred such linguistic and thematic parallels link *Awakenings* and *New Covenants* together, and many of these address the complexities of history explicitly, through a second structural device. Both volumes embed commentary on well-known historical events in line numbers that correspond to the year in which they occurred. For instance, the first volume speaks of Joseph "discovering some brave new world of wealth" in line 1,492, a nod to the year in which Columbus arrived at Hispaniola. But the second volume provides a check on this seeming celebration of colonial greed by identifying Columbus (recognized by Church members as that "man among the Gentiles, who was separated from the seed of my brethren by the many waters") with the Book of Mormon's archetypal villain, Laman, in the corresponding passage:

> And it came 1,490
> to pass that they cast lots, and Laman thus
> was separated from his brethren by
> the Spirit of God; or, it seemed to them
> that God had given the disposing of
> the lot into his lap. But Laban thrust 1,495
> him out and said he was a robber come
> to steal the record of his brethren in
> the church and threatened to cut off his hand
> if he should come again, pretending that
> he was a beggar.

From a perspective lionizing Columbus as the herald of New World wealth to a recognition that he approved cutting off the hands of innocent Taino men and women, the poem resists conclusion by insisting upon an iterative, incremental revelation of meaning across its two volumes. *Joseph* lingers in the interrogative mood, cultivating increasingly refractory, multifaceted views of history.

Although its titular figure is never off stage for long, the poem frequently gives voice to perspectives other than Joseph's own, ranging from family members and friends like Mary Whitmer and Lucy Smith to figures from sacred history, like Mormon and Satan. *Awakenings* is divided into three books, and the first introduces a teenaged Joseph to readers, situating his

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questions about ecclesiastical authority within a larger family tradition of religious seeking. Book II introduces a demonic council that takes up the question of how to prevent Joseph from seeking revelation from heaven, and Book III describes an event that Church members commonly characterize as the First Vision, when God the Father and Jesus Christ appeared to the youth with a message of forgiveness and with instructions about his role in restoring to the earth a fullness of the gospel of Jesus Christ. *Awakenings* then concludes with a relation of the angel Moroni's charge to the prophet that he retrieve plates of gold from a nearby hill and translate the ancient record inscribed thereon. *New Covenants* picks up the narrative four years later, on the cusp of Joseph's trip to retrieve the plates. In Book IV, he marries Emma and, after moving to Pennsylvania with the plates to avoid persecution, makes an initial effort at translation. Book V is a reconstruction of the translation's first pages from the Book of Lehi, which Joseph dictated to Emma, recounting an alternate version of the ancient history found in the Book of Mormon. Readers are introduced to a family of refugees from Jerusalem who make their way to the Americas by boat, to establish two competing civilizations whose founders Joseph Smith identified as the primary ancestors of Native American peoples. Book VI returns to Joseph's own story, describing his efforts to publish the Book of Mormon and to organize his growing band of followers into a church in Ohio. The poem concludes, then, at approximately the halfway point of Joseph's prophetic career, at a moment when he might still have expected a future far different from the one we are familiar with in biographies and histories of his life. In this way, *Joseph* reenacts the tragedy of a life cut short, but its final lines are, paradoxically, a portrait in contentment, depicting the prophet surrounded by his family and followers in a blissful moment of rest—as he might have hoped to conclude his days.

Of course, the poem also ends with a mention of the young woman Joseph hired to help Emma care for their children and keep house: Fanny Alger, whose relationship to the prophet has been the subject of much speculation. Thus, in its ending, as in many passages throughout, the poem accepts Joseph's own account of heavenly guidance and heroic deeds as a factual baseline but incorporates other, less flattering perspectives on his behavior and motivations in an attempt to develop a fuller sense of the man. My understanding of the early history of polygamy and other controversial questions has been shaped both by a careful study of primary sources, from the records compiled by Joseph and his family and followers to the testimony and accusations of his contemporary critics, as well as a consideration of the voluminous scholarship on Smith's life and legacy. Many of the most important primary sources have now been published

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online in *The Joseph Smith Papers*, which include court records and personal reminiscences of Joseph's career as a treasure hunter as well as the attestations of early Church members, who affirmed that the prophet was directed by angels. Readers in search of a modern perspective on these sources may wish to consult a brief bibliography, appended to this introduction, identifying some of the most important works of scholarship I consulted during the research and writing process.

However, this bibliography makes no mention of the many literary sources with which I have been in conversation over the last twenty years. That omission is intentional, a purposive silence. Michael Chabon memorably observed that "every work of art is one half of a secret handshake, a challenge that seeks the password."[4] The pleasure of giving that password is akin to that of unexpectedly reuniting with an old friend—seeing Rebekah in the countenance of that Samaritan woman at the well, or recognizing King Lear's voice in the soliloquies of Captain Ahab—and is too great to spoil by preemptively and tediously documenting every bit of banter with the dead in which an author engages. Readers with eyes to see might notice that I tip my cap to Ralph Ellison in the poem's first verse paragraph and find some gratification in supplying the other half of the secret handshake extended in those lines. But I believe the prophet's story is propulsive in its own right and that readers disinterested in my necromantic inclinations should be able to enjoy tracking Joseph Smith's growth from adolescence to adulthood without worrying about missing an homage to Ellison or Emily Dickinson or C. S. Lewis or Friedrich Nietzsche. Rather than draw back the veil and identify all my interlocutors, I will simply note that literature is a conversation and that learning to recognize its rhythms and recurring cadences has been one of the great pleasures of my life. Those determined to give the other half of Chabon's secret handshake and pass through this veil of silence will, I hope, find in that experience a fraction of the pleasure I have enjoyed in reading the words that now stand for and in behalf of my chosen literary ancestors, as proxies that allow me to converse with them and enter into their presence.

I first conceived of this project two decades ago, before I had even met Ellison or Nietzsche, while washing my laundry by hand in Brazil, where I was serving a proselytizing mission for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. As I wrung out each article of clothing, I listened to Truman G. Madsen's celebratory lectures on Joseph Smith and dreamed of retelling his story in verse. The poem, as I imagined it in Brazil, was to be an unambiguous celebration of the prophet and his divine mission. Twenty-two years later, I am still a devoutly practicing member of the Church,

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and I still believe that Jesus Christ revealed himself to Joseph Smith, commissioning the boy prophet to translate the Book of Mormon and to organize a church that could administer saving and exalting ordinances. But I am, today, far more aware of Joseph's flaws and foibles—the failings that he himself acknowledged in canonized revelations and casual conversations as well as those alleged by his adversaries and disaffected followers. And I feel deep compassion, today, for close friends and family members who experienced their own, belated realization of his humanity as a form of harm or betrayal. As a result, this final product is a much more nuanced expression of my faith than I could have imagined twenty years ago. It is an epic poem that equivocates, inviting readers to consider for themselves whether a beloved LDS anthem like "Praise to the Man" is still the lyric best suited to a twenty-first century understanding of his life and legacy or whether a novel hymn might better encapsulate his contributions to the cause of Christ, to the Church, and to the American mythos he embodies.

Notes

1. Harold Bloom, *The American Religion: The Emergence of the Post-Christian Nation* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992), 127.

2. Orson Ferguson Whitney, *Elias: An Epic of the Ages* (New York: The Knickerbocker Press, 1904), 141.

3. Samuel Johnson, "The Lives of the English Poets," in *The Works of Samuel Johnson*, volume 6 (London: 1824), 161.

4. Michael Chabon, *Manhood for Amateurs* (New York: Harper, 2009), 5.

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The following compilation of scholarly work on the life of Joseph Smith is by no means an exhaustive list of the works I consulted while conducting research for this project. But it should point readers interested in the question of my sources to a representative sample of the most influential books and articles I reviewed throughout the writing process.

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JOSEPH

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